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ABSTRACT

A study sponsored by the Bureau of Adult and Community Education, Florida Department of Education, was conducted by the Center for Needs Assessment and Planning at Florida State University to compare the success of General Educational Development (GED) and traditional high school graduates at Florida's community colleges. Registrars at each of Florida's 28 community colleges were asked to complete a survey designed to gather information concerning students with a GED and those with traditional diplomas. Ten registrars responded to the survey, although they indicated that such data are difficult to obtain. The study found that students with a traditional high school diploma greatly outnumber those with a GED at community colleges in Florida, although all of the registrars indicated that their colleges had an open-door policy for any high school graduate or holder of an equivalent diploma. GED and traditional high school graduates who are admitted spend about the same amount of time to complete degree programs at Florida's community colleges, but the proportion of GED holders actually completing degree programs is smaller than that of traditional diploma holders. The study also found that traditional high school graduates had a slightly higher grade point average (GPA) than GED holders, but that both GPAs fell in the "C" grade range. The study concluded that the results should help to dispel misconceptions held by educators concerning the capabilities of the GED holder in higher education. (KC)

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RESEARCH BRIEF

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GED and Traditional High School Diploma Holders Attending Florida's Community Colleges: A Comparison of Academic Success

James D. Klein Philip J. Grise

Introduction

Florida's General Educational Development (GED) program is one of the largest in the nation, with approximately 35,000 individuals tested and 25,000 diplomas awarded annually at nearly one hundred test centers. While it has been concluded that nearly 15 percent of the high school diplomas in the United States are based on GED tests (Cervero, 1983), research has indicated that the GED accounts for one out of every four high school diplomas awarded in Florida (Ladner, 1986). Due to this substantial proportion of GED holders, questions frequently arise concerning the success of these individuals after they obtain the GED.

Nationally, a large number of GED graduates report that they pursue further education upon receiving a GED certificate (Moore, 1982; Valentine & Darkenwald, 1986). GED follow-up studies indicate that approximately 50% of all GED graduates participate in some type of educational program after obtaining their diploma (Cervero, 1983; Reed, 1984). Many of these individuals become students at two-year colleges (Cervero, 1983). Research has indicated that GED holders have a strong desire to succeed in college, because they realize that education is a desirable way to increase their economic potential (Swarm, 1981).

Several research studies have investigated whether differences exist between the traditional high school graduate and the GED graduate in postsecondary educational settings. While some studies have suggested that individuals with a GED certificate are much less likely to complete postsecondary programs than students with traditional high school diplomas (Quinn & Haberman, 1986), other studies have found no significance between persons with a GED and those with a traditional high school diploma for the rate of persistence in college (Beltzer, 1985). Research has also indicated that the college grade-point-average (GPA) of GED graduates is equal to that of traditional high school graduates (Ayers, 1980; Colert, 1983; Willett, 1982). Additional studies show that GED holders achieve the same level of success as high school diploma holders in postsecondary educational settings (Colert, 1983; Grise & Klein, 1986, 1987; Wilson, Davis, & Davis, 1981).

A study sponsored by the Bureau of Adult and Community Education, Florida Department of Education, was conducted by the Center for Needs Assessment and Planning (CNAP) at The Florida State University to compare the success of GED and traditional high school graduates at Florida's community colleges. The purpose of this paper is to describe the results of that study.

Method

Registrars at each of Florida's 28 community colleges were contacted and asked to complete a survey designed to gather information concerning students with a GED and those with a traditional high school diploma. The survey asked respondents to provide data on the admission, completion, graduation, enrollment, and success of GED and traditional high school graduates.

Results

Ten of the 28 community colleges in Florida responded to the survey by completing all or part of the instrument and returning it for analysis. Six additional community colleges responded that their data base could not readily provide the information asked for by the survey.

The first section of the survey asked respondents to report the number of individuals with a GED and the number with a traditional high school diploma that are admitted to their institution each year. Results indicate that Florida's community colleges admit a far greater number of traditional high school graduates than students with a GED, and that GED holders make up about 7.5% of the community college population in Florida.

Another section of the survey asked for data concerning how many individuals entering the community college with a GED or a traditional high school diploma actually complete a degree program and graduate. Results show that, while 49% of traditional high school graduates complete a degree program at the community college level, only 26% of individuals with a GED complete degree programs and graduate from Florida's community colleges.

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Copies of the full report (released November 1986) are available from: Bureau of Adult and Community Education, Department of Education, Knott Building, Tallahassee, FL 32301.

The survey also asked respondents to provide data on the number of semesters it takes for the average GED and the average high school diploma holder to complete a degree program. Results indicate that there is no difference in the number of semesters it takes for these two populations to graduate from community college, with both spending approximately six semesters to obtain a degree.

. . . traditional graduates have, on the average, a slightly higher grade point average.

The overall GPA of GED and traditional high school graduates were obtained by the survey. Statistical analysis of these data revealed that a significant difference exists between GED and traditional high school graduates, with traditional graduates having, on the average, a slightly higher GPA ($t = 3.94$, $p < .05$). A summary of these results is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1

OVERALL GRADE-POINT-AVERAGE OF GED AND TRADITIONAL HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA HOLDERS AT FLORIDA'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES

GED Holders	Traditional High School Diploma Holders
2.54	2.75

Note: GPA's are significant at or beyond the .05 alpha level.

The last part of the survey had respondents indicate the number of individuals with a GED who are enrolled full- and part-time at their institution. Results show that the majority of GED holders enroll part-time at Florida's community colleges.

Discussion

Gathering data concerning the success of individuals with a GED certificate was not an easy task for many of Florida's community college registrars. Through site visits and phone interviews, it was discovered that much of the data requested were unvailable. An often heard comment was that community colleges do not keep any special records to track individuals with a GED. Many registrars said that people with a GED are not treated any differently than those with a traditional high school diploma.

While the results of the survey indicated that students with a traditional high school diploma greatly outnumber those with a GED at the community colleges in Florida, it should be noted that all of the registrars contacted said that their institutions have an open-door policy concerning admissions, and that anyone who applied with a GED, or any other form of a high school diploma, would be accepted.

While it appears that not as many GED holders are completing degree programs, they may well be completing and attaining goals that are personally relevant.

GED and traditional high school graduates who are admitted spend about the same amount of time to complete degree programs at Florida's community colleges, but the proportion of GED holders actually completing degree programs is smaller than that for traditional diploma holders. A possible explanation for this finding is that GED recipients may focus on specific individual goals (e.g. desire completing a course sequence in mathematics), rather than the more common goal of obtaining an AA degree (Whitney, 1986). While it appears that not as many GED holders are completing degree programs, they may well be completing and attaining goals that are personally relevant. Future research concerning the academic goals of GED holders who enroll in community college should be conducted.

While the results of this study indicate a statistically significant difference between the GPA's of GED and traditional high school graduates, one must consider the implication of this finding in the real world. The average GPA's of both groups fall in the "C" grade range, and are only two-tenths apart. Traditional diploma holders may have a slightly higher GPA than those with a GED, but this difference is not enough to be considered practically important from an academic point of view.

Results from this study should help to dispell misconceptions held by educators concerning the capabilities of the GED holder in higher education settings.

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